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AUTHOR Giese, Frank
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ABSTRACT

After a thorough debunking of the traditional justification for the teaching of French, the author proposes to revitalize interest in language instruction through wide-scale curricular reforms. Socioeconomic problems in the United States are related to student unrest and declining enrollment in language programs. An outline of suggested interdisciplinary courses of study intended to promote greater educational relevance in French studies is developed. (RL)

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HOW CAN WE KEEP FRENCH IN THE CURRICULUM--
OR SHOULD WE?

Frank Giese, Portland State University

Why do we French teachers do what we do the way we do it? Those of us (and it is probably the majority) who are not excessively given to self doubt have a ready series of answers. We are skilled technicians in the art of basic language teaching (lower division), transmitters of a priceless cultural heritage (upper division), and scientific researchers pushing back the frontiers of literary criticism or linguistic history (graduate). In short, we are the keepers of a great humanist tradition, guardians of the eternal values by which our civilization has risen to its present heights, high priests of a cult whose ultimate premises are not to be questioned. Rubbish!

If we could ever be induced to speak frankly, we would admit that we do what we do because that is our job, and job security demands that we be allowed to continue. In addition, we do it the way we do it because that is the way we have always done it, even back into the 19th century.

If we could then add self-understanding to our frankness, we would concede that our "scientific" research is really the quaint labor of antiquarians and bibliophiles, whereby even study of the feeble output of Etienne Jodelle, Petrus Borel or Artus Désiré can fill one's life with joy and give it meaning. As for the frontiers of knowledge, it is enough to note that science libraries are built on current scientific journals, but French libraries can do quite well with Slatkin's reprints of long dead critical texts.

And looking into the future, we are frightened to death, at whatever level we may teach, that the "language requirement" will be abandoned.

As for that priceless cultural heritage we claim to transmit, psychologists know that knowledge is not transmittible from one mind to another. The most we can do is to prepare a climate suitable for learning. Educational theorists echo the theme; but many educators ignore it; and most French teachers have never heard of it.

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Look at our techniques. We have a naive preoccupation with methods. More and more we pin our faith on machines to produce a uniformly "high-level product" (students who can speak the language), without conceding that our average of real success is not far from what it has always been, that is, low. Of motivation, the essential ingredient in any successful learning process, we hear not a word.

Van Wyck Brooks in The Flowering of New England related the experience of Nathanial Bowditch, a Connecticut Yankee of the early 19th century, who later published a classic manual of seamanship, The Practical Navigator. In an era when foreign languages were not taught, either in high school or in college, certain alert citizens wanted to have access to the more sophisticated experience of Europe; Bowditch decided to learn French. To this end he took a French Bible and compared it with his own English edition, thereby achieving a solid reading knowledge. But conscious that his pronunciation was defective, he then frequented the port of Boston talking with sailors from the French merchant vessels until he had mastered a fluent speaking knowledge of the French language.

Nathanial Bowditch is an unusual case. But his history illustrates an important principle for language teachers: a student who wants to learn French will probably learn it, no matter what method is used to teach it; and conversely, a student who does not want to learn it probably won't, no matter what the method. In language teaching, therefore, motivation of the individual student is probably the single most important question. But motivation is the one ingredient which is almost never mentioned in discussions of language teaching methods.

We may continue to reach those students already prepared to play our games. But many superior students in search of a vital experience will continue to ignore us massively.

It is true that at this particular moment in history, there is a strong trend in our national consciousness against appreciation of foreign cultures. "Let them learn our language" expresses an attitude common to all imperial powers. In the 19th century the British, thanks to their extensive empire, achieved a reputation as the world's worst linguists. In the 17th century other people learned French if they wished to communicate with the French. Latin became the common language throughout the empire of ancient Rome. And Athenians coined the word "barbarians" for those outlanders who did not learn to speak Greek.

For a few years after the first Russian sputnik went up in 1957 it looked as though there would be a national trend back to foreign language study. But after all, we didn't prove relevant. U.S. missiles can threaten the Russians even if U.S. leaders don't speak Russian, much less French. So who needs foreign languages? Government support for

our programs is gradually drying up. Not that we frightened them by our militant confrontation with their foreign policies. They just don't need us for what they plan to do.

Furthermore this empire of ours is assailed by problems whose magnitude is only now becoming evident, and which will more than likely destroy us before we can pull ourselves together to solve them. Our national drive for imperial conquest (have we not decided to police the world? And can policing the world have any other meaning than running it our way?) has led us to ignore at home the massive problems of maldistribution of our wealth, and the resultant economic decay of our cities and countryside. Our concentration on commodity culture threatens us with final destruction of our natural environment and with total fragmentation of our social life amid a general indifference to the fate of others. Our indifference to fundamental human problems leaves us incapable of dealing with racism and sexism.

Alert students are turning their attention more and more to those questions as their most urgent problems. And they are right to reject what we have to offer if it is no more than aestheticism, escapism, or preoccupation with forms and methods. We can probably count for some time on the docility of a certain number of our clients, who will continue to accept whatever is offered them. They already form too large a part of our most faithful adepts. But if we cannot speak directly to the deeply felt needs of today's most able students, we might as well prepare to close up shop like the latinists of forty years ago.

In any case, as the language requirements fall in one college after another, fewer students in the high schools will be directed or feel impelled to study any foreign language; teacher training programs will falter; colleges will employ fewer language teachers; our whole fragile, medieval structure will collapse.

And it will serve us right; but it will hardly serve the wider purpose of helping to prepare young Americans to successfully face their problems in a narrowing world. For it is not inevitable that French programs be irrelevant. There is much that an intelligently conceived and executed program of studies can do to interest the best and most concerned of our students, to enrich their understanding of their own contemporary problems.

What should we do, then, to reverse the present unfortunate trend? What can we do to put ourselves back in the mainstream of 20th century intellectual and cultural life?

Our present method of teaching literature is based on a 19th century tradition, which itself grew out of a social situation which has long since

ceased to exist. Until near the middle of the last century foreign languages were not offered in U.S. schools or colleges, and there was little contact of Americans with Europe. But in the course of the intellectual revival in New England, cultural leaders realized the tremendous importance that acquaintance with modern Europe could have in the struggle to escape from the narrow restrictions of puritanism. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow became the first professor of modern foreign languages at Harvard College. Those few privileged men who attended college about 1840 were presumed to have already acquired a general knowledge of the world they lived in. The study of French or German or Spanish literature gave them insights into an alternative ideology and life style, just as study of the Greek and Latin classics had provided the men of the renaissance with an alternative to the concepts of the medieval church.

In the late 20th century, no optimistic assumptions about the general cultural background of the majority of students coming to our language classes are warranted. We should therefore abandon the concept of literature as aesthetics, as an independent entity, sufficient unto itself, and understandable and studiable without reference to anything else. We should turn instead to the study of "Modern France," in whatever of its major or minor aspects we (students and teachers) find pertinent. This may well turn out to include literature, it probably will to some degree. But the best way to discover what is irrelevant in our program is to take a completely fresh look at what we now offer. And we now offer "literature." As if there were some sacred essence in French letters that we alone were qualified to reveal. No, our first step must be to recognize frankly that literature alone does not represent the totality of French culture, but only a small fraction of it. We must further admit that our students come to us unprepared to deal with any aspect of that culture. To teach them unadulterated literature is unadulterated nonsense.

We should abandon the idea that controversial questions are unsuitable or dangerous to present or discuss in French classes. "Dead center" is dead indeed. It is an untenable position if we intend to persuade alert students that our field is worth bothering with.

Modern France has had its share of controversies, and these have been copiously commented upon by French men of letters. French literature in its broadest sense reflects these controversies, and they can be profitably studied through it. History and its documentation can claim to have resurrected the skeleton of the past, the bare bones, and even some of them missing. Literature and the other arts can clothe this skeleton with flesh and give it some semblance of life.

But the study of France exclusively through its literature is inadequate. The past is useful only insofar as it bears on the present and future. It is folly to expect Americans of student age, with all the real

problems they face, to develop a passionate interest in "La Guirlande de Julie" or the poetry of Lefranc de Pompignan.

Whatever the reasons which induced our predecessors to concentrate exclusively on the literature or the language of earlier periods, our subject is modern France. And our main thrust must be towards an understanding of the totality of our subject. Modern France has been one of the centers of turmoil in Western civilization, the prototype for much that has happened elsewhere. Modern France colonized much of Africa, and was colonized in its turn by Germany from 1940 to 1944. The lessons the French learned in struggling against the Occupation were used against them as their own empire was dismantled. We must make clear to American students the close relationship of recent French experience to their own experience in the U.S.A.

Another need is the development of courses that draw on other departments and disciplines, even if texts and discussions must be in English. To persuade students that the study of French can be useful to them, it may be necessary to introduce them via English to such writers as Mounier, Sartre, Malraux, Lévi-Strauss, Crozier.

Here are some suggested courses of study, the precise format to be determined by student interest:

1. A course with reading and discussion entirely in English treating current controversial issues in France. These might include the Catholic intellectual resurgence, French Marxism, Sartre and existentialism, Lévi-Strauss and structuralism, Barthes and literary criticism, Lacan and psychology, Fanon, Memmi and Césaire on colonialism. It would be desirable to involve faculty from philosophy, psychology, theology, anthropology, art, literature, sociology, history and political science. Such a course could continue indefinitely, one or two topics per term, slightly or radically different each time a former topic was renewed.

2. A course for reading knowledge, treating any or all of the same issues. Reading in French, discussion in English.

3. A course for majors and prospective teachers treating entirely in French the same topics, or any selection of topics. Add recent French reactions to U.S. civilization, the university crisis, the consumer society in its French forms. This course could replace a traditional course in "20th century civilization and culture,"

but it would enable a competent teacher to present the same topics in more living form. It would have the added advantage of sending teachers to secondary schools better prepared to deal creatively with these issues.

4. A course in modern literature which would include the entire French-speaking (ex-colonial) world, and would likewise relate to such areas as cinema, painting, colonialism, education, World War Two, Gaullism, etc.

5. A new survey, by-passing the traditional chronological history. Keep something that represents an introduction to French literature in its most important aspects: aristocratic and popular origins, classicism, rationalism, romanticism.

6. Or else, a course on satire, using social commitment through the centuries as a new measure of that literature which was not socially committed. A new survey?

7. A course in poetry from the Romantics to the present, stressing its relation to social upheavals, and its transition from versifying towards spontaneity and beyond.

8. A similar course for the theatre since Jarry, stressing its iconoclastic and absurd aspects, as well as its commitment.

9. A course in the modern novel, stressing in turn, self-understanding, escape, commitment, revolt, aestheticism, nihilism.

10. A course on colonial literature as an antidote to fashionable trends in contemporary French intellectual life.

11. A living French theatre, both at classroom and at semi-professional levels addressed to the public.

We might initiate a series of public lectures on contemporary France, with advance publicity in the community as well as the institution, and with a brief printed handout outlining the topic for those attending. Again we should draw on faculty from other disciplines and other institutions to round out our symposia.

These lectures could be the starting point for more sustained and intensive collaboration between departments, leading to combined majors and perhaps to interdisciplinary graduate degrees.

A few possible examples follow:

1. with anthropology--an integrated program of general linguistics with Romance or French linguists. Here there are possibilities for a combined major and for a Master's degree.

2. with anthropology--a program on French anthropological thought, French language, and field work in paleontology or ethnology in the French-speaking world.

3. with history--a combined major and advanced degrees in French language and French political or intellectual history, or in French history and literature.

4. with library science--preparation of librarians who are well qualified in one or more foreign languages as well as librarianship.

5. with philosophy--a major in modern French philosophical thought.

6. with political science, psychiatry, sociology--similar combined majors, and possibly advanced degrees.

If we sincerely want to send out teachers into the public schools who can cope with the many problems existing there and still send qualified language students to the colleges, we have some hard thinking to do about what our teacher training program should consist of. One thing is certain, graduate programs now in existence should be radically reviewed with the purpose of directing them towards real needs and not antiquated fantasies. And no new graduate programs should be introduced just for the sake of having graduate programs, until we are certain of what we are trying to do.

We are all experimenting, I should hope, to make sure that the unique contributions of French culture and thought to the modern world will not be lost to the current generation. To succeed we must eliminate the irrelevancies of traditional approaches to the teaching of French literature and civilization, and concentrate on those aspects of modern France which can help young Americans to radically change their world.

A glance at most of our professional journals will show that they are ill-prepared to exercise any leadership in effecting this change in orientation.

I suggest the establishment of a news sheet to serve as a clearing house for the dissemination of information regarding experiments in progress, as well as ideas for new angles in the teaching of French culture, civilization, literature and language. Such a sheet could accept articles on innovations in all aspects of teaching and studying French, from first-year elementary school to Ph.D.

I would like it to take a frankly radical stand, that is, to start from the premise that much rather than little needs to be done. But I would like to leave room for serious debate of all suggestions for change, and not limit it to expounding any particular set of ideas. There should be room for the broadest theories of education, as well as for new orientation of present courses, and practical suggestions for new courses. In short, nothing dealing with the study of France and the French language would be excluded.

Eventually there should be room for pertinent material concerning other languages and cultures, but at the outset I would like to limit the orientation to French. The intention of this is not invidious; rather it is felt that each culture has its own interests and problems. To deal with them all would reduce the effectiveness of this effort to reinvigorate the study of French.

If you react in any way to this paper or its contents, including the proposal for a news sheet, please send your reaction to Frank S. Giese, Department of Foreign Languages, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.